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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 005411

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ASAD TELLS SEN. NELSON SARG WILLING TO  
COOPERATE ON SYRIAN-IRAQI BORDER

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires William Roebuck for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL), member on the Senate Armed Services Committee and on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (and soon-to-be appointed member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, we were told) met for approximately one hour with President Bashar al-Asad and FM Mu'allim on December 13. Nelson and Asad discussed U.S.-Syrian Relations, Iraq, Lebanon, Hizballah, Hamas, and Iran. Asad emphasized that Syria was willing to cooperate with the United States on Iraq, specifically on Syrian-Iraqi border security, even mentioning the possibility of Syrian cooperation with either Iraqi or U.S. forces in this area. However, Asad was equally emphatic that the United States needs to take the first steps on new dialogue with Syria. He also made clear that Syria does not support the Siniora government because it did not want to have good relations with Syria, a situation Syria could not and would not tolerate. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) U.S.)SYRIAN RELATIONS: Overall, Asad asserted his willingness to engage with the United States, underscoring that there were common interests. Nelson encouraged Asad to provide a signal of such willingness. Asad's first comment was that Syria had shown signals in the past, but was only rewarded with negative responses from the U.S. Later, Asad said that if the U.S. needed a signal, they should take Syria's resumption of diplomatic ties with Iraq as a signal, adding that Syria did not do this for the U.S., but that it did represent a sign of their willingness to be helpful. Asad also underscored that USG &marketing8 tries to create the belief that Syria promises to help and doesn't follow through, a claim which he dismissed. He reiterated that Syria had the will to engage with the U.S., but was waiting to hear from the U.S. on the mechanism for such cooperation.

13. (C) IRAQ: On Iraq, Nelson asked Asad about a recent Reuters report stating that during Mu'allim's trip to Baghdad on November 19-20, Syria had signed an agreement with Iraq that expressed support for U.S. troops remaining in Iraq "until they were no longer necessary." Asad commented that Syria thinks there should be a timetable for withdrawal of U.S. troops and that the U.S. troops in Iraq represented an occupation of the country. FM Mu'allim interjected that the only change in Syria's policy was that previously Syria wanted an immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops, but now they supported a timetable for withdrawal. (Comment: Asad's and Mu'allim's comments are essentially re-statements of the SARG's standard position, and both in effect are dismissing the accuracy of the Reuters report. End Comment).

14. (C) Asad emphasized several times during the discussion

that he believes the United States and Syria have a common interest in maintaining stability in Iraq. On the specific issue of border cooperation, Asad commented that Syria has been willing to cooperate, but that the U.S. government has chosen not to cooperate. He recounted several visits by USG officials in 2004 and said that Syria had made clear at that time its willingness to cooperate. Asad claimed that there had been no follow-up from the U.S. side. Asad also said in the absence of U.S. cooperation, Syria had unilaterally made some physical upgrades on the border with Iraq, deployed more troops to guard it, and augmented airport screening procedures to make it difficult for terrorists to enter Syria and use it as a base for entering Iraq. Asad underscored that Syria was willing to cooperate with either Iraqi or U.S. forces on border security and was waiting for the U.S. to provide a mechanism or scenario for doing so.

15. (C) LEBANON: President Asad was emphatic that Syria does not support the government of PM Siniora, asking "Why should Syria support it when the Siniora government has not tried to have good relations with its neighbor, Syria?" Asad said several European delegations had been to visit him and asked him not to interfere in Lebanon. Asad said that he had told them Syria, in compliance with UNSCR 1559, was not interfering in Lebanon. He said that in fact, the U.S. and the Europeans were asking Syria to interfere by encouraging them to support the Siniora government. Asad said that just as with other parliamentary governments where there was a lack of confidence expressed in the government, Lebanon should call for early elections. He somewhat sarcastically agreed that these elections should be "free and fair." He further commented that no matter who the U.S. wants to support, if the people in the Lebanese street say Siniora should go, then the international community should respect

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this. Asad further emphasized that Syria has no military or intelligence forces in Lebanon. However, he claimed that Syria's influence in Lebanon has actually increased since the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon, and he put a positive gloss on the state of relations between Syrians and the Lebanese, highlighting the close business and family ties that unite the two countries. Asad pointed to Michel Aoun's recent support of Syria as an example of improved relations. Responding to a question on the Hariri investigation, President Asad said that Syria was supportive of the process, and that it was in its interest to do so, since in his view the Syrians are innocent. He said officially they do not know who was responsible, but "unofficially" they thought it could be al-Qaeda. FM Mu'allim interjected that they did not know who was responsible.

16. (C) SYRIA'S SUPPORT FOR HAMAS AND HIZBALLAH: Asad was very vague on Syria's relationship with Hamas and Hizballah, stating only in broad terms that these "parties" were in their own countries, and that "Syria was Syria." He also said that both these groups had been "elected" because the people supported them. Nelson asked that Syria be helpful in influencing the return of the Israeli soldiers captured by Hamas and Hizballah. Asad responded by raising the issue of 20 Syrians held for years by Israel, and stating Syria would be helpful, if these individuals were released. (Note: The ICRC has verified that Israel holds these Syrians and has told us they have been convicted by the Israelis of committing terrorist acts, many of these years ago. End Note). Asad said that a mediator was necessary for the issue of prisoners and suggested Germany could play this role. On the issue of arms transiting to either of these groups through Syria, Asad said that it was impossible arms were transiting Syria to Lebanon because of the presence of the Lebanese army, Siniora's "security apparatus," and others on the Lebanese border. He also said arms could not transit Syria for Hamas since Jordan was in between Syria and Hamas.

17. (C) IRAN: In response to Senator Nelson's assertion that Syria should be concerned about a nuclearized Iran, Asad

sidestepped and spoke about Syria's attempts in 2003 for a UN resolution declaring the entire Middle East a nuclear-free zone, commenting that the U.S. had stopped this attempt. On broader relations with Iran, Asad said Syria needed Iran's support because Syria has been isolated by the U.S. and others in the West. He added that his government would not easily abandon Iran's support. However, Asad was also quick to emphasize that Syria was not a follower of Iran. Asad added that the Middle East is an ideological region and that the U.S. would need to support one of the main ideologies: pan-Arabism, Islamism, or the Persian influence, claiming that the U.S. should realize that a secular-focused pan-Arabism was more closely aligned with its interests. Asad also raised the point that the U.S. should not be fooled into thinking there were many pro-U.S. moderates in Iran, saying that even groups opposed to President Ahmadinejad were still against the United States. FM Mu'allim interjected that my direct danger comes from Israel, citing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's remarks in Europe that appeared to include Israel among nuclear power states.

18. (C) U.S. EMBASSY DAMASCUS SECURITY: Nelson raised the security concerns of the U.S. Embassy in Damascus after the September 12 terrorist attack and highlighted the Embassy's desire that the SARG partially close one of the streets around the Embassy -- and limit traffic on another -- which leaves it vulnerable to a vehicle-bourne explosive device. Asad noted that like the United States, Syria also suffers from terrorist attacks, highlighting the June 2006 attack against the Syrian Radio and Television station. He also responded by claiming that there is a new diplomatic area outside of Damascus and that the best course of action is for the Embassy to move out to this area. FM Mu'allim added that the SARG and the Embassy were in discussions on this issue. (Comment: The diplomatic area at present has no infrastructure in place and the SARG has not indicated any willingness to move forward with discussions on this issue, despite repeated Embassy efforts over a sustained period of time. Most observers believe that such a move, even with the best of SARG intentions, is at least several years away. End Comment).

19. (U) Codel Nelson cleared this cable.

ROEBUCK